

Column

In the rural South you can still see crosses along roadsides emblazoned with the words ‘Jesus is coming soon’. In the early 1970s a story was circulating that someone had picked up a hitchhiker who delivered this message before mysteriously disappearing from the backseat a few miles down the highway.

In the same decade, I knew a man who borrowed a hefty sum of money. He was not at all concerned about how he was going to pay it back because he was confident that the ‘rapture’ was going to happen in a year or two. Perhaps he had gotten his information from Hal Lindsey’s bestselling thriller “The Late, Great Planet Earth,” which was still very popular at the time.

The belief that our Lord’s Second Coming is just around the corner is not, however, a phenomenon reserved for the 1970s. It may well have been around in Bible times. In 1 Thessalonians 3:10, we find Paul issuing a rebuke: “If any would not work, neither should he eat.” It seems likely some had folded up their toolkit and were sitting down waiting for the Second Coming.

Interest in our Lord's appearing continues down to the present day. Hardly a year goes by without someone making a prediction that our Lord will come on this or that day.

The Christian Church, following our Lord's teachings in the New Testament, encourages balance on this subject. On one hand, the fact of our Lord's second appearing is clearly affirmed, but wild speculation about the day and hour is discouraged.

This balanced approach might be summarized like this: the Christian should keep one eye on the eastern sky, the other on the furrow God has given him to plow in the present. Future hope and Kingdom work must not be split apart.

The English statesman William Wilberforce sets for us an example. His Christian faith led him to campaign for two decades for the abolition of the African slave trade. In 1807, the Slave Trade Act was finally passed in Parliament.

Wilberforce's labour in the present age (and ours) will not be lost when Jesus appears the

second time. Paul tells us as much in 1 Corinthians 15:58: “Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labour is not in vain” (RSV).

One way the Christian Church keeps us on task is the four-week season of Advent in which we now find ourselves. In this period, we are reminded of the certainty of Jesus’ coming and the hope it engenders, but also of our calling to work until we hear the trumpet sounding. We’ll work till Jesus comes . . . may this be our song and cry in Advent and beyond.

O LORD Jesus Christ, who at thy first coming didst send thy messenger to prepare thy way before thee; Grant that the ministers and stewards of thy mysteries may likewise so prepare and make ready thy way, by turning the hearts of the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, that at thy second coming to judge the world we may be found an acceptable people in thy sight, who livest and reignest with the Father and the Holy Spirit ever, one God, world without end. Amen.

*(Collect for the Third Sunday in Advent, Book
of Common Prayer)*

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